



A Critical Evaluation of the heroines of Nadine Gordimer

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Abstract— *The conflict of identity and allegiance is exemplified in Nadine Gordimer's portrayal of the white African woman who is intellectually and emotionally alienated from white colonial society and at the same time physically barred from black Africa. Gordimer's usual subject is the young woman who ventures from the white enclosure, who walks out of the sick relationship between the white mistress and black servant, and identifies her own quest for an independent identity with the blacks' cultural, political and finally, military quest for freedom. The fiction of Gordimer presents the ambiguous, self divided figure of the white girl or woman is the site of the hesitant, fraught rapprochement of white and black. The image of the black body buried in the white-ruled land is a powerful pattern in Gordimer's fiction. She has followed this metaphor of white South Africa as a graveyard, connecting the imagery of dryness and sterility prevalent in white South African fiction with decadence and death. Black South Africa oppressed and repressed, is the buried body that threatens, or promises, to raise up- to inundate and destroy, or to revive and fertilize- the country of the whites. The metaphor of the buried black body is both self and other. The black other can neither be assimilated nor granted full personality by the white subject. The white subject in Gordimer's fiction cannot 'self' the black other. The novel's metaphor is of white South Africa as 'a picnic in beautiful graveyard where the people are buried alive under your feet'. Gordimer uses the interior monologue to bring out the experience of Africa as inside the white mind.*

Keywords— *identity, freedom, self divided, decadence, revive, buried-alive.*

In a colonial context, the world of woman is very complex and multi-directional. She is pulled in one way by her sex and another by race. As a white woman she is placed on the pedestal on innocence and purity; she is an embodiment of the virtues of white civilization in the heart of darkness. She is taught to hate and fear the black man. The conflict of identity and allegiance is exemplified in Nadine Gordimer's portrayal of the white African woman who is intellectually and emotionally alienated from white colonial society and at the same time physically barred from black Africa. Through her rebellion against the patriarchal order as she struggles to define herself in a hostile environment, her heroine uncovers the connections between patriarchy and racism under colonialism. She begins to identify with the black Africans in their oppression and their struggle for autonomy, but she cannot shed her inheritance of privilege and guilt. Finally, she is shut out from the vibrant life of black people, rich with pain and possibility.

Gordimer's usual subject is the young woman who ventures from the white enclosure, who walks out of the sick relationship between the white mistress and black servant, and identifies her own quest for an independent identity with the blacks' cultural, political and finally, military quest for freedom. For her heroines, the blackness is linked to sex, sensuality and imagination, to water and blood, and the politics of liberation. The Gordimer heroine's acceptance of blackness leads her to become a revolutionary in increasingly concrete terms. But, as the heroine's participation in the black revolution becomes more active, more realistic, she is caught in the crux between sex and race. As a woman she identifies with the black liberation struggle, but as a white she bears a legacy of privilege, which her good intentions cannot remove.

The women characters of Gordimer draw strength to act independently from their plane of weakness. Her South African women are in a sense outside the brutal pact between the male colonizer and the male colonized. The

white woman is not allowed to claim innocence; nevertheless, she is increasingly prevented by the social and political conditions of apartheid from acting upon her responsibility.

The fiction of Gordimer presents the ambiguous, self divided figure of the white girl or woman as the site of the hesitant, fraught rapprochement of white and black. She is the site of connection while she is made to realize the impossibility of connection. Her female characters are both internal arena in which the conflicts of South African society are played out, and meeting places where illicit relationships between the races develop. (I am the place where something has occurred –Rosa Burger, a character)

The image of the black body buried in the white-ruled land is a powerful pattern in Gordimer's fiction. She has followed this metaphor of white South Africa as a graveyard, connecting the imagery of dryness and sterility prevalent in white South African fiction with decadence and death. Black South Africa oppressed and repressed, is the buried body that threatens, or promises, to raise up- to inundate and destroy, or to revive and fertilize- the country of the whites. The metaphor of the buried black body is both self and other. According to Gayatri Spivak, the white subject cannot self the other; she can neither see the colonized other as a free subject nor successfully identify with him or her. The black other can neither be assimilated nor granted full personality by the white subject. This is true for the relatively developed realistic character of Marisa Kgosana in *Burger's Daughter* as well as for the dad man who is more symbol than character in *The Conversationist*, in which novel Gordimer compares colonial and male domination through the figure of a sexually and economically powerful white male, Mehring. The white subject in Gordimer's fiction cannot 'self' the black other. Similarly the female other cannot be selfed by the male member. In *The Conversationist*, Mehring, like Kurtz is shattered by finding his enemy; the black and implicitly female other within. In contrast, the white colonial female character can 'other' herself less destructively, more creatively and empathetically, because of her identification with blackness.

In *The Lying Days*, Helen Shaw tries to self her black other Mary Seswayo but is blocked by a wall of difference and indifference. The novel's metaphor is of white South Africa as 'a picnic in beautiful graveyard where the people are buried alive under your feet'. The white world of South Africa is a false paradise built on the suffering and destruction of the others. Helen fails in her quest to resolve her psychic apartheid, to integrate the buried black aspect of herself, which is linked to the real flow of life underneath the surface of the white mine,

compound and the white city. By the end of the novel she is shut off, divided from her buried black part of life.

At the end of *Occasion for Loving*, Jessie Stilwell starts to become one by removing herself from the protection of white society. A similar change takes place in *The Late Bourgeois World*. In *The Conversationist*, the buried body rises amid imagery of resurrection and revolution ("But violence has flowered after seven years' drought, violence as fecundity, weathering as humus, rising as sap"). Gordimer uses the interior monologue to bring out the experience of Africa as inside the white mind. It is continued in *Burger's Daughter*, in which Rosa speaks essentially to herself. Judie Newman describes Rosa as the buried body whom she and we unbury through the text. In the novel, towards the end, Rosa is withdrawn from us as Gordimer focuses on the Soweto children take the future into their own hands not foreseen by the white communists. In *July's People*, Nadine Gordimer puts to test the white heroine in the aftermath of the revolution. The novel's ambiguous ending, "she runs" is more artistically truthful than the ending of *The Lying Days*, which it echoes –"I'm not running away," Helen claims insincerely en route to Europe. At the end of *July's People*, Maureen is described as a cornered animal panicked by her new found freedom from the white defined role as mistress of a comfortable suburban household. Maureen and Helen the good middle-class South African daughters and wives, who observe the liberal decencies in their relationships with their black inferiors, clearly are dead-end heroines for the author.

In *A Sport of Nature*, Hillela can survive and flourish in revolutionary conditions. Her otherness in white South Africa enables her to manipulate the transition to the future. The blackness is not alien to her. But her character does not mould in concrete terms. Through her character we see her vision statement. She is committed to be in the country (South Africa) as an activist. She rejects the good liberal daughter in herself. Nadine Gordimer's development of Hillela as a character stems from her own apparent need to free her central character from the white colonial dilemmas that snared her previous heroines between two worlds- a kind alienation from both the white and black societies. Helen, Jessie, Rosa and Maureen leave the ambiguous shelter of the white society for an ambiguous association with black movement. Rosa chooses to come home to prison because only within that enchanted circle can she overcome her whiteness, her alienation and her otherness. The laws of apartheid, distrust, resentment, fear, doubt separate her from her black associates. Inside, she and Marisa are sisters. Bassie is her brother. Hillela reaches black world without

a natural evolution but because of the creative lift of the author.

Hillela Kgomani in *A Sport of Nature* is not subject to the social bonds, the rules of behaviour or finally, the failure of imagination, which binds and limits Maureen and Helen. As Gordimer has explained the character of Hillela in an attempt to imagine a white South African woman who can survive, even flourish in the revolutionary conditions. Hillela may not seem realistic but has visionary outlook. Hillela triumphs because she does not belong, because she does not conform, because she is a selfish, amoral law unto herself. Sexual freedom is her road to revolution. Her relationship with a coloured boy alienates her from the white community. Her strangeness enables her to manipulate the transition to the future. For her, blackness is not alien, but rather her native element. But Hillela, like the buried body in *The Conservationist*, is a mythic rather than realistic role. She is a symptom of her author's hope. Gordimer holds that somebody like Hillela can sometimes see in instinctive way that the political ways just don't work, and can find her own way.

"The theme of the black other as the white self's double resonates through white colonial writing from Conrad to Coetzee. The white man's Africa is mirror of the dark heart of his culture and psyche" (Vissel). While the interplay between the processes of dichotomizing and identifying is complex and problematic in the male writers, it approaches the paradoxical in white female writers. The attempt of the Gordimer's heroine to empathize with the black other as her fellow in oppression leads her to discover, confront and liberate the other within herself. Gordimer's major female characters contribute effectively to understand the frames of polarized, volatile country and their limitations as well.

CONCLUSION

The feminine voice from Schreiner to Gordimer displays, vividly and subtly, the struggle to protest and the shades of assimilation contouring the ironies of social, political and personal order. The white African woman-protagonist suffers because of her gender and yet enjoys the vantage point of her white identity. This identity clouds the transformed positions of her 'self' across the planes of exterior and interior dynamics of being. Finally, everything is judged by one's race and this is true of Gordimer's heroines as well. The empathy, of course which is not condescending, towards the black souls serves as a complement of life under formation which is a necessary service for self and society. This attitude is a consolation to the oppressed at political dimension and

liberation to the White at personal dimension. By and large, her women protagonists assert this phenomenon. Like their counterparts, they are processed through social class, expected cultural roles, and place. Gordimer's fiction focuses female spheres, communal spaces, domesticity, and sexuality etc.

The heroines of Gordimer navigate a system that has rendered them inferior and dictated the spaces in which they should identify. They do not resolve the issues of their society. Their evolving nature reflects the ever-changing roles that men and women undergo. Gordimer forces her readers to go beyond 'this' and 'that'. The Life demands going beyond such points, in the direction of a third possibility- or even moving from there. The Gordimerian heroines achieve this process effectively to a great measure.

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